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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted focusing on three aspects of a developmental English program in which underprepared freshmen were able to earn regular composition credit while receiving additional help in both reading and writing. An examination of the scores on the Iowa Silent Reading Test compared to scores on two writing tests was made and some significant relationships were noted. The developmental English program, which provided extra class hours and help in reading the required English textbook, was discovered to be moderately successful. The predictive value of specific reading related factors on the developmental course grade was explored and no relationships were found. (MKM)

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READING AND WRITING: RELATIONSHIPS AND FUNCTIONAL READING COMPONENT IN A FRESHMAN COMPOSITION COURSE FOR UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

Marilyn M. Fairbanks Mary K. Elliott

An increasing tendency for both reading and writing improvement components to be offered to underprepared college freshmen was noted by Miriam Chaplin (1979) in comparing results of two surveys of college reading programs conducted approximately five years apart. The Developmental English I program, designed by a West Virginia University English Department Committee headed by Patrick Conner, Coordinator of Developmental English I, and initiated in the fall of 1978, offers a plan by which underprepared freshmen are able to earn their regular composition credit while receiving additional help in both writing and reading. As offered during its first semester

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of operation, students in Developmental English I sections and students in regular self-paced sections used the same manual and text, completed the same composition assignments, and were provided at least one tutorial session per week for evaluating related writing assignments. Also, the final grades of both developmental and regular self-paced students were determined on the basis of the number of assignments successfully completed by the end of the semester. However, students in developmental sections were additionally assigned to four hours of structured classes per week: One hour of lecture/discussion by English department faculty on assignments and elements of composition; one hour of workshop, stressing grammar and guided writing; and two hours in a functional reading program designed and conducted by the University Reading Laboratory, a separate unit at WVU.

In initiating the program in the fall of 1978, academic advisors were informed of the program and were requested to assign students to Developmental English I sections on the basis of a single criterion, a standard score of 11 or below on the English subtest of the American College Test (ACT). Of the 80 students enrolled by advisors in the developmental sections, 40 were criterion students with ACT English subtest standard scores ranging between 5 and 11; 25 had no ACT data available; and 15 had ACT English subtest scores above this criterion.

This paper focuses on three aspects of the program in which the University Reading Laboratory staff was directly involved: (1) an examination and comparison of reading and writing variables; (2) a description and evaluation of the functional reading program designed

by the University Reading Laboratory to aid students in understanding and applying the written materials provided for them; and (3) a study of the predictive value of specific reading-related factors on course achievement.

READING/WRITING RELATIONSHIPS

For aid in program planning, as well as obtaining information about reading-writing relationships, the Iowa Silent Reading Test, Level III, Form E (1972), was administered to students in all Reading Laboratory sections of Developmental English I. Analysis of reading scores available for the 36 of the 40 criterion students in these sections for whom complete data was available indicated that on each reading subtest (Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Reading Efficiency) more than 50% of the students scored in the bottom quartile (1 to 25%ile) on norms designed for high school seniors planning to attend four year colleges and universities. On the Vocabulary and the Comprehension subtests, more than 90% of the criterion students scored below the fiftieth percentile on these same norms.

The relationships between four reading-related variables and two writing-related variables were examined for the 36 criterion students in the study. The reading variables were the Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Reading Efficiency subtest scores and the composite Reading Power score on the Iowa Silent Reading test. The writing-related variables were the English ACT subtest scores and a writing score assigned by Kula (1979), based on her evaluation of three coded themes per student.

Correlation coefficients between English ACT scores and the four reading variables identified indicated a correlation of .41 between

English ACT and Vocabulary, significant at the .01 level and a correlation of .32 between English ACT and Reading Power, significant at the .05 level. Correlation coefficients between the writing score and the same two reading variables was .42 for Vocabulary and .41 for Reading Power, both significant at the .01 level. Other relationships were not significant.

DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION OF FUNCTIONAL READING PROGRAM COMPONENT

At a preliminary meeting involving English Department representatives and the Reading Laboratory director, it was agreed that the major objective of the reading component of the Developmental English program would be to aid students in reading, understanding, and applying the relevant assigned materials in text and manual to written assignments, on which the course grade was based.

With this objective in mind, a "functional" rather than a "direct skills" approach was chosen. Herber (1978) defines a functional approach to reading in a content area as focusing on the teaching and reinforcement of those reading-related skills important in understanding the specific content being taught. Riley (1979) graphically illustrated functional reading as involving: (1) identification of content, (2) process-oriented selection of skills, (3) design of instruction to incorporate reading and learning tasks, and (4) acquisition of both content and process (relevant reading skills) by the student. The functional reading program developed for Developmental English I will be briefly discussed, following the steps outlined by Riley.

Identification of Content

The focus of the content was the course manual (Miles, 1978) which contained assignments and provided explanatory materials and assigned portions in the text, Twenty Questions for the Writer (Berke, 1976).

Process Oriented Selection of Skills

Through an analysis of the reading assignments in text and manual, three categories of content were identified: (1) directions for the written assignments; (2) explanations about elements of composition, structure, or t of writing to be completed; and (3) literary models chosen to illustrate types of writing and/or elements of composition being stressed. Each of these types of content had specific purposes, and writing styles varied.

Processes considered important for reading directions were those that would promote literal understanding of what was to be done and how it was to be done. Skills and processes stressed with reference to reading explanations about writing were those designed to promote literal understanding of the material, interpretation as applied to writing assignments, and application in actual writing. Processes considered pertinent to reading of literary models provided included reading to understand content, organization, and structure; to interpret the author's reasons for his specific approaches and style; and to consider what might be applicable to individual writing assignments.

Design of Instruction of Incorporate Reading and Learning Tasks

Students met in small groups, averaging eight per group. Seven URL staff members were involved in the instruction, and staff

planning sessions were held weekly. The instructional design and materials prepared to implement it, were aimed toward the meeting of the following specific objectives: (1) to build understanding of the basic nature and requirements of upcoming assignments before official introduction in lecture and workshop sessions; (2) to focus on the specific elements of composition or structure being emphasized; (3) to read and analyze models provided to illustrate the types of paragraph writing given major emphasis which included narrative, description, process, and comparison and contrast; and (4) to provide opportunity for students to apply the assignment to their own experiences in preparation for selecting a topic and organizing ideas for actual writing.

Materials for student use and staff guidance were developed weekly by three University Reading Laboratory staff members (Fairbanks, Marshall, and Elliott, 1978). Materials included (1) study guides of various types to focus on the understanding and application of important concepts and content; (2) vocabulary exercises with varying emphasis on use of context clues, multiple meanings of words, shades of meanings, and concepts conveyed by specific word combinations; (3) materials which helped students deal with difficult concepts, such as structuring their writing in a coordinate or subordinate sequence; and (4) materials which simulated assignments in such a way as to prepare students for them, without impinging on their individual responsibility for specifically doing them. At the weekly staff meeting, evaluation and suggestions for changes in future materials were discussed, as well as planning for the next assignment.

Each instructional period of 50 minutes was designated to introduce specific objectives, to involve students in guided reading, and to provide for group discussion and interaction concerning materials read and their implications for future writing assignments.

Acquisition of Both Content and Process

Evaluation of the reading component specifically was informal and consisted of (1) discussions with both students and English Department Staff, (2) completion of an attitude questionnaire, and (3) asking students to offer written suggestions for improvements.

On the attitude questionnaire, more than 80% of the students indicated that the Reading Laboratory program had been "helpful" or "very helpful" in terms of preparation for assignments, understanding writing materials, etc. Major suggestions given included a request for more emphasis on vocabulary and for a plan by which students who were able to work ahead on their assignments could be excused from Reading Laboratory sessions.

Formal evaluation of the overall Developmental English program, of which the reading program was just one component, was carried out and reported as a separate document (Kula, 1979). In this study, three different writing assignments (from which all personal identification had been removed) were read and graded for four groups of students: (1) criterion students enrolled in Developmental English I sections, (2) criterion students enrolled in regular self-paced sections, (3) above-criterion students enrolled in self-paced sections, and (4) above-criterion students enrolled in developmental sections.

Results indicated that criterion students in developmental sections had higher mean scores on their writing than did above-criterion students in developmental sections. Kula conjectured that above-criterion students in developmental sections may have felt hampered by the structured requirements of the program and developed a negative attitude which may have affected results. Also, the higher average English ACT scores of the 100 above-criterion in regular self-paced sections as compared to the 15 above-criterion students in the developmental sections might well suggest a higher competency level among these students.

READING-RELATED VARIABLES AND COURSE ACHIEVEMENT

A stepwise multiple regression procedure was used to estimate the predictive value on course achievement of five ACT variables (English, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Composite) and Iowa Silent Reading Test variables (Vocabulary, Comprehension, Reading Power, and Reading Efficiency). No significant relationships were found. Factors attributing to this are thought to include: (1) the relative homogeneity of the group (ACT English subtest standard scores ranged only from 5 to 11), (2) the grading procedure based on number of successfully-completed assignments which could well reflect the motivation and self-expectation of students as well as their writing competency, and (3) the small sample size.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of both student and English Department staff responses and the evaluation material obtained, the University Reading

Laboratory functional reading component in Developmental English I was considered at least moderately successful in terms of its major objective, aiding students in reading, understanding and applying the written materials used in the course. The vocabulary inadequacy of the students as reflected by test scores and their own expressed need, indicate that greater stress should be put on vocabulary development for these students. Also, more than one-half of the group were in the lowest quartile on the comprehension subtest given. In terms of the larger goal of aiding students with academic deficiencies in achieving overall academic success, further program provisions should be tried and evaluated. These could include both credited reading/study skills programs and "functional" reading programs attached to other courses.

Findings concerning reading and writing comparisons of criterion students and predictive value of both ACT and reading test variables can only be considered highly tentative because of the small number of criterion students involved. However, they do suggest the need to explore the relative value of additional selection criteria. Although no substantial predictive value of the vocabulary subtest for course grade or writing proficiency was indicated by the present study, the relatively high correlation coefficients would seem to merit a further investigation, using a larger and more representative sample, to test its possible predictive value and use as a selection criterion for program participation.

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